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Morning Glory Harley

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Morning Glory Harley

46 A man drove his Harley down the morning glory, the great concrete drain that controls dam flow, and he lived, spewed out onto the spillway. This was the best legend of our teenhood, bar none, beating out even the Nebraska Loch Ness monster that lived 162 feet down at the bottom of that dam, a beast bass fishermen on a hot still day would not discuss, would look off to the side of their boats where the dam rose and spit toward the deeper end instead of set you straight. The man on the motorcycle could have been one of those fishermen. The fishermen here were numerous and nameless enough, men from any of the five counties surrounding the lake that the dam made, perhaps a fall fisherman wearing a heavy wool jacket and boots that filled up fast when his dingy-sized boat tipped the way they did four or five times a year when the wind took them. Who really knew about boats here when the shores were lined by fine white sand formerly known as the Great American Desert? If a fish didn't come right up and lick the bait clean, these fishermen sometimes stood up in their bows and jabbed at them with homemade spears. A foolishness like that could cause a boat to capsize. And because the fisherman in question would most likely have already drunk the contents of a well-laced thermos, he usually couldn't swim to save himself. He and his boat would be inexorably sucked down into the cement whorls of the morning glory. Onlookers—for there have to be alleged eyewitnesses for every legend—seeing the sunken crushed boat whirling down the face of the morning glory, could have mistaken it for a Harley.

But usually the man in the story was part of a pursuit. The law had made the mistake of trying to catch some hotrodding freshly-licensed kid crossing the dam the way the dam—a straight cut between two colors of water—invited, especially a dam the second largest in the world (at least of those dams made of dirt) that is, a dam with a very nice long stretch of highway across its big dam face, and in the pursuit, the officer and his vehicle went out of control, broke a barrier and landed in the water sluicing the concrete funnel.

Or maybe it was the teenager himself who fell in, dodging the patrolman until that fatal turn, where he and his machine spectacularly leapt over the barricade and landed upright on the surface of the morning glory to buzz its sides like some desperate circus act, knowing the gas wouldn't last.

Whoever went in had white hair when he came out.

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This was an important detail for all my friends. Maybe just plain fear of the size of that hole had started the legend, or the Freudian fear of the female and funnels, or just the fear of anyone getting older than eighteen. Exactly who was involved felt less important than whose side of the law you were on and if you could drive and how fast, and how late at night you left for the dam, a trip from Ogallala which took about ten minutes—and sometimes, on moonlit, warm summer nights, all night to return from.

We owed the dam and its romance to irrigation. A Charles Kingsley some thirty years before had spent thirty years of his own to get it built as a Depression project. We danced through the resultant sprinklers, we cut lawns as green as alfalfa. Even at the very edge of town, the lawns were not the end of the green, weeds did not brown endlessly into the horizon, like they should, given the rainfall. New eight-foot-tall robot sprinklers walked across the adjoining acres of alfalfa most summer nights. The noise of these robots chugging across the land obliterated even the drums of the Sioux who came down from the reservation every summer to perform for tourists who had had their radiators quit or found they could not drive across country without sleeping. Maybe they complained about the noise. Not us. Irrigation was our salvation.

Long ago, there was just the lazy Platte oxbowing its way past Native Americans posing for George Catlin's portraits, swarms of buffalo drinking beside the wandering cavalry, and a million cattle wallowing in its back eddies at the end of the Texas Trail. During a few decades of rainfall, Swiss peasants right out of Mari Sandoz' autobiographical novels, and even black cowboys homesteaded the area, then their Model T's disappeared in the shoals of the Dust Bowl.

Ten years after the dam was built and politicians made hay and so did the few farmers who owned adjacent acreage, a centrifugal pump came into use that made it possible to draw out underground water. We had a lot of it. In fact, we had the most underground

water in the world. Ogallala claims greatest access to the huge subterranean lake that stretches under seven midwestern states, water named, serendipitously, the Ogallala Aquifer. By the half century mark, farmers were emptying that aquifer at the rate of 1,000 gallons a second.

48 We were the sons and daughters of the greatest climate change man had ever engineered—even the Pharaohs kept to the banks of the river, even the Greeks didn't drain the Mediterranean. Well, Kingsley Dam was a little smaller than the Aswan, and the Ogallala Aquifer was only the size of Lake Huron, but our fathers, filled with post-war optimism and ebullient over the new pump, now produced enough crops to feed a fifth of the world. No more roadside shanties selling used tires and fresh bread—we had indoor pools and fancy quarter horses and enough Cadillacs to beat out a Texan. Like a deposit of gold that water was, to be sucked out of the ground in a few decades after sitting there for seven million years. You could practically hear farmers pulling the plug. But did our fathers know—as deep as those wells, those fathers—did they know they were leading us all down the morning glory?

In the fifties, my Bohemian grandmother—no Cather character—held court over her sons and their acres of dryland wheat. After her Sunday rosaries, my father would drive us to his wheatfield, walk deep into it and select a shaft for us to chew, to debate whether the grain was ripe yet. Overhead there was always an enormous thundercloud, bringing hail more often than rain. But below, deep under the acres of the wheat's golden waves sat Persephone, presiding over her vast, dark but still pure, lake.

A multinational electronics plant dumped many million of gallons of waste into the Aquifer, as have many a farmer his pesticides and insecticides and everything-icides. My sister, an ex-EPA lawyer, now battles contract pig farmers who threaten to do the same with the waste of thousands of animals. Paid in baby sitting and plumbing and sometimes hamburger, she has stemmed the growth of the industry, at least at that end of Nebraska. My cattle-ranching, sunflower-growing father has sat on several state water commissions, doing his best to continue draining the Aquifer. But the dam he wants full. It's not just the water-skiing, sailing regatta, windsurfing capitol of the Midwest but a visible triumph of man over the difficult environment most appreciated by men like

himself who've spent a lifetime fighting it. Environmentalists, however, insist that the rare whooping crane and flamingo find the lake more congenial when it's drained. Now the lake's banks are so low you can snorkel to where an old town was drowned, its stop signs in better shape than the wind-raked, bullet-holed signs at either end of the dam.

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The body of the man with the motorcycle was never recovered. No doubt the Loch Ness monster devoured it after spurning some choice imported-shark-soaked-in-beer bait that the fishermen are always touting. Or else he just walked away into the crowd of onlookers. There was never an official report. Perhaps the officials didn't want to put fear or a copycat suggestion into the minds of all the upstanding citizens young and old who might or did use the lake, still the biggest tourist attraction for five hundred miles. I don't remember the lake being dragged other than for the toddler whose father insisted he swim. Surely if the casualty had been a patrolman, someone would have put up a plaque: Here Lies Poor Kowalsky, died in the call of duty. But maybe there wasn't money for a plaque, the wily farmers here are cheap and hate the cops who don't always pretend not to notice their overloaded pickups or their speeding with the chaff spinning behind them in glorious wake or their lack of fishing licenses on a day off.

The Final Version VII of the motorcycle story ends like this: the man's still riding his bike but he doesn't leap triumphantly out of the hole and back onto the highway to show off his new white hair. Instead he takes the bike down, down, all the way to the underwater town. There he guns up to the sunken stop sign where Persephone still waits, underwater cigarette burning languidly between her pale fingers, hand on generous hip, breasts to here, ready to escort him down to the real dive, some fun cave with a view of the fetid shores of the vast, dark and poisoned Aquifer.